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SUBJECT: U/S EDELMAN ON COUNTER-NARCOTICS COOPERATION AND
OPERATION RUM PUNCH (MAR 1 - MAY 31)

REF: A. A) LARGENT-KING (OSD) EMAIL 2/5/07
[1](#)B. B) SANTO DOMINGO 320

Classified By: Political Officer Michael Garuckis for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. On February 2, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman, DEA Chief of Operations Michael Braun, Commander of U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South) Rear Admiral Jeffrey Hathaway, Ambassador Hans Hertell and other U.S. civilian and military officials met with senior Dominican officials in advance of Operation Rum Punch, a U.S.-led multinational effort to disrupt the narcotics air bridge between South America (primarily Venezuela) and Hispanola during the period March 1 - May 31. Dominican officials, while agreeing on the necessity for anti-narcotics cooperation, stressed that poor funding and inadequate material resources limit their ability to contribute. Dominican officials further suggested that Venezuela would provide little assistance in disrupting the air bridge. In response to a direct request for material assistance from National Directorate for Drug Control (DNCD) Director Major General Rafael Ramirez Ferreira, Edelman stated that the USG would look into the possible transfer of excess defense articles to the Dominican government. Edelman and Braun followed on with press interviews highlighting the need for inter-governmental cooperation and the dangers posed by a growing domestic drug trade in the Dominican Republic. (See REF A) End Summary.

Background: Operation Rum Punch

-- Drug Flows into Hispanola

[1](#)2. (SBU) Based on data provided by both U.S.-based over-the-horizon military radars (OTH) and aerial intercepts, the DEA estimates that approximately 61 metric tons of narcotics enter Hispanola by air annually, with nearly every kilogram arriving on a flight originating in Venezuela. These Venezuela-based narcotics flights depart for Hispanola an average of 11 times per month, with the Dominican Republic the ultimate destination roughly two-thirds of the time. In terms of delivery methods, roughly 90 percent of flights off-loading narcotics to

Haiti do so by landing in Haitian territory, while two-thirds of flights delivering narcotics to the Dominican Republic do so by air drop (often offshore). The vast majority of these narcotics are eventually transshipped to the United States.

¶3. (SBU) Although the traffickers' aerial operations appear fragile -- JIATF-South estimates that no more than 12 pilots are involved -- counter-measures have proven difficult. Venezuelan denials of responsibility, combined with the lack of a strong police presence in northern Venezuela and the inability of Dominican and Haitian officials to arrest local ground crews and foreign pilots, have frustrated attempts to roll-up the criminal organizations using the air bridge.

-- The Local "End Game"

¶4. (SBU) Operation Rum Punch is designed to break, at least temporarily, the intelligence logjam by giving local Dominican and Haitian police authorities the material and expertise necessary to execute an "end game" (i.e., to effectuate arrests).

¶5. (SBU) Operation Rum Punch is a three-month (March 1 - May 31) multi-agency operation using Department of Defense OTH, Navy Orion observation aircraft, U.S. Coast Guard platforms, DEA Citation and Cessna aircraft, two DEA rotary-wing airframes, and two DHS Customs and Border Protection Blackhawk helicopters. In the Dominican Republic, Tactical Response Teams comprised of officers from the DNCD and the DEA will be staged, either with DEA helicopters at San Isidro Airbase, Dominican Republic, or with CBP helicopters in Puerto Rico. Mixed DEA - DNCD ground teams will also be positioned near areas historically used as destinations for

narcotics flights. The operational planning includes mixed DEA-Haitian ground teams in Haiti but does not include the use of helicopters.

¶6. (SBU) After a countdown involving a series of staged warnings based on OTH data and aerial data/intercepts, TRTs and ground teams will respond to predicted drop zones or landing fields. Arrests and subsequent prosecutions will be undertaken by local authorities.

¶7. (SBU) A successful end game will do much to restrict overall narcotics flow to Hispanola and, ultimately, the United States, as success will force shipments to the sea (where law enforcement experts assert that interdiction of narcotics is easier).

U/S Edelman at the DNCD

¶8. (SBU) On February 2, Edelman, accompanied by Braun and Hathaway, traveled to the Dominican Republic to express support for Rum Punch and to stress the importance of continued cooperation in regional counter-narcotics initiatives. Together with Hertell and other Embassy, DOD, and DEA officials, the three met with the DNCD's Ramirez Ferreira in his office.

¶9. (C) Ramirez Ferreira began the meeting by noting the difficulties in transforming the Directorate from a "inflexible military structure" into something more suitable for anti-narcotics work before suggesting that the greatest problem faced in the fight against narcotics is corruption -- both in the Dominican Republic and abroad. Ramirez Ferreira also noted that poor funding, the relatively small size of the Directorate, and a dearth of equipment (i.e., "go-fast boats," aircraft, and radars) exacerbate problems caused by structural change and corruption in the Dominican Republic. The combination of these factors renders the Caribbean "open" to both ships and aircraft. In discussing the "Caribbean," Ramirez Ferreira described the serious problem of illegal narcotics inflows across the Haitian land border. (Note: Embassy-based DEA officials assert that narcotics inflows

from Haiti are minimal.)

¶10. (C) Edelman, in turn, suggested that Dominican officials "see the threat in exactly the right way" in regard to the dangers posed by corruption to recently formed democratic institutions. He then pledged that, although U.S. military commitments stretch our force structure, "we have not forgotten our commitment to this common struggle." In identifying the source point of the narcotics entering the region, Edelman emphasized Venezuela's role. Easily observable in Ramirez Ferreira's anteroom was a DNCD video projection of suspect aircraft tracks from November 2006 showing 20 non-scheduled flights departing Venezuela for Hispanola and Colombia.

¶11. (C) Edelman and Ramirez Ferreira also discussed the impact drugs can have on populations in light of Dominican concerns that a growing portion of the narcotics passing through the country stay to meet increased local demand.

¶12. (C) Difficulties in cooperation outside the U.S.-Dominican relationship were also discussed, with Ramirez Ferreira emphasizing problems coordinating with his Haitian counterparts ("a country in chaos") and Edelman mentioning Venezuela's tacit acceptance of drug-trafficking operations in the north (a "virtual free zone" or "safe haven"). Continuing the discussion on cooperation, Ramirez Ferreira mentioned an upcoming "Drugs Conference" scheduled for March 15 and hosted by the Dominican Republic. According to Ramirez Ferreira, the Conference will be attended by the presidents of Colombia and Haiti, as well as the prime minister of Jamaica. A "high-level" representative of the U.S. Government will also be invited. (See REF B for invitation list)

¶13. (C) A discussion of "next steps" following the conclusion of Rum Punch resulted in a DNCD request for U.S. military

surplus, specifically boats, aircraft and radars. Edelman committed to examining the "possibility" of providing helicopters as "excess defense articles" but cationed that training, maintenance, and parts for the helicopters would not be included. Ramirez Ferreira said that if provided, the DNCD could cover these associated costs.

¶14. (SBU) At meeting's end, Hathaway invited Ramirez Ferreira to visit JIATF-South to view operations and strengthen coordination and Braun pledged continued DEA support for counter-narcotics efforts. Braun also secured from Ramirez Ferreira an agreement to allow cross-border operations during Rum Punch so that Dominican-based DEA helicopters could conduct interdictions in Haiti.

Lunch with Dominican Officials

¶15. (SBU) Similar discussions were held over a following lunch hosted by Hertell, with Attorney General Radhames Jimenez Pena, Armed Forces Secretary LTG Ramon Aquino Garcia, and DNCD Director MG Ramirez Ferreira in attendance. Discussions centered around the visit's focus topic, Operation Rum Punch and the Dominican-U.S. cooperation in the counter-drug war.

¶16. (C) In reference to the importance of cooperation among government agencies, specifically the DNCD and Dominican Secretary of Defense (SEFA), and intra-agency cooperation,

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Edelman encouraged both Aquino and Ramirez Ferreira to learn more about joint warfighting at the U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) if such a visit could be arranged. Edelman asked Hathaway if he could explore that possibility. USJFCOM at Norfolk, Virginia, instructs U.S. and allied officers in combined, inter-agency and joint operations and planning. Edelman encouraged Ramirez Ferreira's to visit USJFCOM with the understanding that he would first complete the offered

meeting at JIATF-South in Key West. Aquino and Ramirez Ferreira said that the DNCD and the armed forces work well together. (Note: This cooperation is not apparent to Embassy country-team members who view their daily operations and policies. Embassy thinks competition for scant resources and disunity in command keep each entity at arms' length and uncooperative.)

¶17. (C) Both Ramirez Ferreira and Aquino discounted Haitian cooperation in the drug war. According to the generals, the Dominican government cannot depend on the Haitian government to enforce its border, saying "the Haitian nation has had no sense of unity since 1803." Aquino mentioned the two biggest problems with his armed forces as being lack of equipment and Haiti. His primary desires are more small arms ammunition, an air-search radar system, and interdiction aircraft. Without these requirements, he said he is unable to adequately protect the Dominican Republic from drug traffickers, human smugglers and other threats. Edelman agreed that the will to work together is critical but that tools are also necessary.

¶18. (C) Aquino also commented that the Venezuelan government adds instability to the region and that President Hugo Chavez' rhetoric causes Dominican government officials to question his true objectives. According to Aquino, the Dominican government is concerned about Venezuelan official attitudes because they are cultural friends and Caribbean neighbors with a history of partnership. Ramirez Ferreira added that his Venezuelan counterpart will not be helpful in identifying the source of drug trafficking flights from Venezuela. The new Venezuelan appointee is a former intelligence officer and Chavez henchman. Ramirez Ferreira reminded Edelman that Venezuela staunchly denies that narcotics flights destined for Hispanola originate in Venezuela. Ramirez Ferreira opined -- and Edelman agreed -- that the government of Venezuela purposefully creates problems in prosecution of the drug war, as it desires to flood the United States with drugs in order to degrade U.S. strength and deny the United States regional influence.

Press Interviews

¶19. (U) Following the lunch, Edelman and Braun conducted interviews with reporters from two major Dominican newspapers, El Dia and Hoy. Both papers gave the interviews favorable front-page coverage.

Comment

¶20. (C) The visit by Under Secretary Edelman came at an important time, with Rum Punch about to begin and the increase in suspect flights from Venezuela raising concerns. It demonstrated Department of Defense attention to the Caribbean and the counter-narcotics fight at a time when many regional leaders accuse the United States of neglecting both in favor of Iraq, Afghanistan and terrorism.

¶21. (U) Drafted by Michael Garuckis. This cable has been cleared with the Office of Ambassador Edelman.

¶22. (U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
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